

Georgian Dream's election victory puts the country at a crossroads between Russia and the West.

by Blog Admin

*This month's parliamentary elections in Georgia resulted in defeat for President Mikheil Saakashvili's party, and a clear majority of seats for Bidzina Ivanishvili's 'Georgian Dream' coalition. **Hrant Kostanyan** assesses the impact of Georgian Dream's victory, arguing that the country will likely pursue a more balanced foreign policy, maintaining its course of integration with the EU and NATO, but also seeking to improve relations with Russia. However, this foreign policy vision will have to face a tough reality test.*



Georgian Dream and Reality: a new post-election era?

The victory of the coalition dubbed Georgian Dream (GD) in parliamentary elections on October 1st represents the first ever transfer of power through the ballot box in Georgian history. With 84 seats out of 150, the GD has the majority it needs to form a government, leading to another first in Georgian politics: cohabitation – with the president and the prime minister coming from opposing parties. This ends nearly a decade of total political rule by President Saakashvili, but what does it mean for Georgia's domestic and foreign policy?

Saakashvili's mixed legacy

The Rose Revolution of 2004 did not wholly live up to the promise of its name. Under Saakashvili there were drastic improvements in public services, bureaucracy, infrastructure and a crackdown on petty corruption and organised crime. The economy grew, but the benefits were not felt by all: unemployment figures stand at around 35 per cent and poverty levels at 25 per cent. Democracy itself was under attack, with the government overpowering the legislature and judiciary and limiting media freedom. The recent [video tapes](#) of prison inmates being tortured have exposed the ugly side of Saakashvili's established system.

President Saakashvili ran an election campaign that should have assured victory for his United National Movement (UNM), using every administrative, judicial, police and media resource possible, including tampering with the electoral rules and redrawing constituency boundaries. His main contender, Ivanishvili was portrayed as a Russian agent sent to derail Georgia from its route of Euro-Atlantic integration. Yet, despite these violations, the majority of Georgians voted for change.

Domestic challenges ahead

Ivanishvili now takes office as prime minister, amid profound challenges and domestic constraints. His GD coalition will not have the complete power that Saakashvili used to enjoy. For the coming year at least the coalition will have to work with President Saakashvili, who still holds strong executive powers that are supposed to be transferred to the prime minister, but only after presidential elections in October 2013. Ivanishvili's initial 'solution' to power-sharing was to call for the president's resignation on October 2nd. But Ivanishvili has since announced that the president's resignation is not "a political demand or ultimatum" and is shying away from creating the image of a power-hungry leader like the president. The GD has also stated that although its members were treated unfairly in the run-up to the elections, a witch-hunt like the one of 2003-2004 will not be repeated.

Ivanishvili is not only constrained by existing presidential powers, but also by his own six-party coalition, which includes a diverse array of western-minded liberals and xenophobic nationalists whose unifying force has been the desire to remove Saakashvili and his UNM from power. Against this backdrop, Ivanishvili is expected to tackle serious domestic issues and create a fairer social system. The current employment regime exploits its workers. Agriculture was one of the main victims of the last decade's policies and now requires aid and the stimulation of local production. A number of commodity cartels need breaking up and fairer conditions for business should be established. The law enforcement system, the judiciary and media are all crying out for liberalisation and reform.



Mikheil Saakashvili (Credit: European People's Party / CC BY-SA 3.0)

A new foreign policy vision

Over the last decade, Saakashvili hailed membership of NATO and the European Union as top foreign policy priorities for Georgia. By contrast, relations with Russia were at their lowest ebb, especially following the 2008 war, after which Russia recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the first post-election meeting between Saakashvili and Ivanishvili on October 9th 2012, the latter stated that their foreign policy goals were similar. Saakashvili, however, spoke of “fundamental differences.” The truth lies somewhere in between.

Conceptually, Ivanishvili aims to make the shift from playing ‘geopolitical games’ to engaging in regionalism. In real terms, while staying on the path of EU and NATO integration, Ivanishvili intends to improve relations with Russia. This poses a number of problems. On the one hand, some parties in his coalition openly oppose Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration. On the other hand, although Moscow welcomed the election results in Georgia, the normalisation of relations with Russia in parallel with moves to deepen Western integration will be a tough balancing act to pull off, as will convincing Russia to reopen its market to Georgian goods such as wine, fruit and mineral water. As a starter in the process of the normalisation of relations and opening its market, Russia might ask for a softening of the current rhetoric used by Georgia in describing Russia on the international scene. This would be a difficult concession for Ivanishvili to make at the moment.

Ivanishvili’s victory is also unlikely to change the positions of the Moscow-backed de facto authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia towards Tbilisi in the foreseeable future. The operationalisation of Ivanishvili’s balanced foreign policy vision will thus have to face a tough reality test. For now, the international community may expect more stable leadership in Tbilisi. Ivanishvili ran an impressive election campaign. Running the country will prove more of a challenge.

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